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The Kremlin Reacts

The readers of this paper have lately been treated to a heap of lies, hackneyed fabrications and falsehoods—or so says the Soviet press in commenting on this column's discussion of the oil problem.

The party paper, Pravda, has a colorful description of this writer walking up and down his office, with the room freezing "because of the Middle East conflict," and rubbing his hands as he concocts "yet another anti-Soviet libel." Articles in Izvestia and Sovetskaya Rossiya hint darkly at the grand design behind some of the recent columns, and Moscow Radio broadcasts in English, Arabic and other languages, reveal it outright. The real purpose of these columns, they say, is neither more nor less than to stop the process of detente. And the Literary Gazette calls me simply a "blockhead."

I have rarely been the target of so concentrated a campaign, of which these are only a few samples. More often the Soviet papers content themselves with a few scattered references to a column they find particularly offensive, and then move on to more deserving causes. The last comparable occasion was when the Soviet press took objection, before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, to an article in which I said that the Soviet Union had decided to intervene by force.

The article, said Izvestia, was an attempt to damage the friendship between the Soviet and Czechoslovak peoples—and it didn't even think to apologize when the invasion took place. This time too Moscow Radio says in a broadcast in Arabic that the purpose of the column is to damage the friendship between the Arabs and the Soviet Union.

Only the most superficial reading of my recent articles could have led Moscow to the conclusion that it, and it alone, was being blamed for the oil embargo. Obviously a great many factors went into the making of the Arab oil strategy. The shrewdly calculated commercial interest of the oil-rich sheikdoms was well served by the patriotic calls to liberate Arab lands, and vice versa. Another factor was the Kremlin's patient campaign, over many years, to educate the Arabs in

the use and the value of the oil weapon.

It is worth quoting from an analysis, made more than a year ago, of the arguments that had then been pressed on the Arabs by the Kremlin for some time. Moscow was saying, the analysis noted, that "without oil, life would come to a stop" in the industrial West, that oil accounted for more than half the physical volume of the world's trade and a third of the world's shipping. Without oil, Moscow said, all the arms of the NATO powers "would be reduced to a heap of rusting metal. The analysis concluded, long before the threat of an oil embargo began to be taken seriously in Western capitals: "What the Russians are saying to the Arabs is that those who control the supply of oil can also control the policies of the West."

The analysis — a column by this writer—was based largely on Soviet press material and on broadcasts in Arabic. One of Moscow's arguments was that if the "reactionary" oil kings did not put the oil weapon at the service of the "liberation movement" and turn it against Europe and the United States, then the Arab people, led by left-wing revolutionaries, would rise up, with the implied support of the Soviet Union, and overthrow the oil sheiks. This was intended to incite the Arabs and to blackmail the sheiks. Of course this does not prove that the Soviet incitement produced, by itself, the Arab oil embargo. But what the Russians were saying in public was only a small part of what they were saying privately to the Arab leaders about the politics of oil.

Of course, it was not Moscow Radio that had talked King Faisal into joining the oil embargo. But the Kremlin helped to create the conditions which brought an originally reluctant Faisal to the conclusion that if he does not grasp the oil weapon, and indeed become its leading wielder, he might lose his kingdom and all the oil in it.

The words spoken on the Kremlin's behalf over the years are on the record. Any further analysis would only show how consistently Moscow has urged the Arabs to do what they are

now doing, and how aware it was of the benefits which the Soviet Union would derive from it. It is all there—the disruption of the West's economy, of the Western system of alliances, of the "international oil monopolies," and, of course, the forcing of Israel to its knees. But the Soviet Union's prime concern was with the use of the oil weapon against the West, and it was urging the Arabs to use it against Israel because it knew that this would weaken the West and would thus automatically put the Soviet Union in a relatively stronger position.

If that was the Kremlin's purpose, then some very important questions should be asked. Moscow expects from the West a large flow of credits, technology and grain during bad harvest years. But should the West thus reward a Kremlin which has worked so hard to disrupt the West's economy? It is because these questions are being asked by policymakers, though so far only in private, and because the Kremlin knows that they are being asked, that the Soviet press has been unleashed to refute so heatedly the analysis offered in this column.

It is no defense to argue on behalf of the Kremlin, as some do, that whatever Moscow did in earlier years has been superseded by the policy of detente. Perhaps it has been. But to the extent that the Kremlin's earlier incitement of the Arabs has contributed to their use of the oil weapon, the only way to wipe the slate clean is for the Kremlin now to try to undo the damage. It could use its powers of persuasion on those Arab governments with whom it has some influence, in combination with the efforts of the Western powers, to speed a peace settlement and to end the oil embargo and the production cutbacks.

If it does not, it can hardly expect a Western economy suffering from an energy shortage—or even under perennial threat of shortage, if the present crisis is overcome—to provide the Soviet Union with the economic fruits of detente. The Kremlin's calls for detente have been very loud—but what's sauce for the Kremlin gander is also sauce for the Western goose.

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